

Wycliffe's Seeds Continue to Sprout [one]

1. **[two]** Wycliffe and Hus had several goals in common, all of which were new and very frightening to the powers that ruled their world. They believed in freedom for the common man, for a division between the church and the state with each free to run their affairs, and for the need to release the scripture into the world.
2. Wycliffe is known by historians as “the morning star of the Reformation.” The light he lit would eventually start a fire – but it would take over 100 years before Martin Luther and others caught that flame.
3. They were not political rebels in the sense that those were who wrote the Declaration of Independence. You see, they believed that nations were best led by nobles: their nobles, not the nobles of another nation and certainly not the nobles in Rome.
4. One of Wycliffe's students was named John Purvey. He continued to translate scripture and produced several scripture portions to be spread among the people secretly. He also published some of Wycliffe's sermons (all copied by hand, remember). One of those sermons was called “The Wicket” and it dealt with the Lord's Supper and how it belonged to the people in their homes, not in the hands of clergy, locked away in a cabinet in a cathedral. This was radical and considered treasonous.
5. Something else very interesting was going on as these scripture portions and sermons were being distributed: they were standardizing English. Until that time, there was no accepted spelling of English words and no agreement on grammatical rules. Between Wycliffe and Chaucer, English became, for the first time,

a language in which someone could write in London and someone else could read it in York. This ignited a hunger among the people to learn to read. That led to a nationwide learning renaissance and that led, in time, to the abolishment of the feudal system and the rise of the common man. By 1394, the Archbishop of York, a man named Arundel, [three] was able to declare at the funeral of Anne of Bohemia (Queen of England, wife of Richard II) that she had read the four gospels in English and was, therefore, more learned in the scriptures than the priest and bishops in England. This was scandalous but it proves that the movement launched by Wycliffe was getting braver and more open.

6. The Roman Church reacted strongly to Arundel and to the continuing danger the students of Wycliffe posed. The Pope sent his men after Arundel to reeducate him by force. It took a long time but Arundel was eventually beaten down. Fourteen years after that funeral sermon, he was once again on the side of Rome [four] and declared “..that from henceforth no unauthorized person shall translate any part of the Holy Scripture into English or any other language, under any form of book or treatise.” He eventually invited in the Inquisition (previously banned in England) and burned many Lollards and others who dared oppose the Roman Church. He also pushed and had passed a law that all books had to be licensed by the church and state before publication.
7. The Roman Catholic Church wanted to make sure people knew that even death would not help them escape their clutches. Forty four years after his death, the bones of Wycliffe were dug up, burned, and his ashes thrown into the river. They had launched war against the Lollards but, as Foxes Book of Martyrs reminds us, the river that received Wycliffe’s ashes, the Swift, flows into the Avon and the Avon goes into the Severn, the Severn into the

Bristol Channel and, from there, to the ends of the earth...and so did Wycliffe's message.

8. Meanwhile, back in Germany, a printer was working on an idea he'd had for quite a while. [five] He carved blocks of wood in his shop in Mainz in the year 1454 and experimented with pressing them into ink and then on paper. He had just created the world's first movable type. In a huge technological leap, printing a book now went from 18 months to a matter of weeks. The world would never be the same. If books are available, and if the people can read, nothing is impossible to them. (my talk to an elementary school on Summer School road)
9. At this time in history, you had no choice who or what you were going to be. You were what you were born. There was no upward mobility. To call on common men to learn to read and then supply books...that was as radical as tossing tea into Boston Harbor or Gandhi sitting down at the train station in Delhi. And that brings us to someone you've never heard of but who would advance our story: Thomas Linacre. [six]
10. He was the first of a string of men born at exactly the right time. Five years after Gutenberg invented the modern printing press with movable type, Linacre was born. John Colet and Erasmus were both born in 1466. Martin Luther was born in 1483 and Tyndale in 1494. They would be the ones who would overthrow Roman Church rule after more than 1000 years of absolute reign over the affairs of men and the church...and none of them could have done what they did without Wycliffe going first to preach, teach, and translate portions of scripture. The Lollards prepared the ground for them. The Secret Society took the scripture into locked down, heavily guarded places in Europe.

And Gutenberg's press made their work possible. All things worked together for good...

- 11.** Linacre got a handful of doctorates in medicine, philosophy, and science. As was the custom of the day, he then went on to get his highest degree in theology, then known as the Queen of Sciences. After two years working in refugee camps for those displaced by the Fall of Constantinople (the Muslims were on the march), he returned to Oxford and studied the oldest Greek texts of the scripture then known to exist...and he was greatly troubled by what he found. The Greek text differed so greatly from the Vulgate Bible (the only legal bible at the time) that he confided to a friend in a letter that [seven] "either I am not a Christian or the ancient texts before me are not the Gospel."
- 12.** Linacre joined the Lollards and, perhaps, the Secret Society. The Secret Society was formed for the express purpose of getting the yoke of Rome off of the backs of secular rulers. He confided to John Colet that the Latin Bible – which was the only Bible in existence as far as the Catholic Church was concerned – was seriously corrupt and did not represent what the Greek texts said. Colet was disturbed by this enough to take a leave of absence from his work to go to Italy and study ancient, Biblical Greek. Two years later, he returned to Oxford (1496) and he and Linacre produced the first book of Greek grammar ever printed in England.
- 13.** The future King Henry VIII made Linacre his personal physician. That included much more than medical treatment – it included religious teaching and personal, life advice, too. If you know anything about Henry VIII and the Roman Church you know that God placed a good man right beside a very corrupt, immoral man at just the right time.

- 14.** Remember that history happens everywhere at the same time. While all of this was happening, shockwaves were rolling through Europe at the fall of Constantinople. [eight] The Muslims took it in 1453 after its religious and secular governments had become so corrupt and so complicated that its very name came to mean “purposefully complex and meaningless bureaucracy” – Byzantine, from the older name for Constantinople: Byzantium. [nine] The Roman Church had contributed to the fall of its old rival and that was beginning to be understood as well by the rulers of Europe, making them uneasy about what the future might hold for them.
- 15.** As refugees fled the Byzantine Empire, they took with them ancient books that had disappeared from Europe for many hundreds of years. Until they arrived with their possessions on their backs, Europe had completely forgotten about Plato, Socrates, Aristotle, and the early church fathers. Once the books arrived, they were taken into the state, official libraries...and read. The Roman Church tried to intercept these books and destroy them but too many got through. The dam had developed serious cracks.
- 16.** [ten] John Colet – remember him? – was so taken by the scriptures Linacre had shown him that he did the unthinkable. He quoted them in public, in sermons. At St. Paul’s Cathedral in London, he stood and read the words of Paul to his congregation, returning to them week after week: no sermon, just reading. The common people heard the scripture in their own language and cried. The church was jammed every week. Colet insisted that Paul meant just what he said and that he said what he meant to say. He also said that subsequent statements from Rome had no

authority to overrule Paul...and that was jaw droppingly brave for anyone to say.

- 17. Let's back up a second:** Rome DID use scripture, but only when it wanted to and then in an allegorical, sub-authoritative way. The first to treat scripture as allegorical was Origen (we think), a bishop from North Africa. In other words, the story of Noah wasn't a story of Noah...it was a mystical lesson that had hidden meanings; which animals were gathered up first, second, etc. Then add the dimensions of the Ark and take that number and apply it to the number of holy days, Christian obligations, and penances that were required of Christians so that you might not perish in the flood of sin...you get the idea.
- 18. John Colet rejected this.** He told the people that the words of the Bible meant what they appeared to mean and that they were superior to any edict or explanation that came out of Rome. The only way he could say this and live was that his father was the Lord Mayor of London (second only to the king). The Inquisition threatened Colet but couldn't touch him. Rome knew that England was ripe for rebellion against Rome and they didn't want to push too hard. Besides, Colet's father and the king's men were armed and constantly watching for agents of Rome.
- 19.** Colet openly broke the law by teaching at Oxford in English. It was illegal to teach in any language but Latin (keeping the common folk ignorant). He taught his students how to read Greek and then translate bits of scripture into English. He also publicly taught that the Vulgate Bible was corrupt and unreliable. His students loved him. The faculty didn't.
- 20.** When the faculty sent Colet to St. Paul's Cathedral, it was to keep him out of the public eye. Though it could seat thousands,

less than 200 showed up on any given Sunday. Colet's overflow crowds stunned them – and terrified the rulers of the university.

- 21.** In the crowd, listening carefully, [eleven] was a man known to us as Erasmus. Erasmus decided that what was needed was a new, accurate Greek New Testament so that all scholars could see for themselves how inadequate a bible the Vulgate was. He immediately received death threats and was expelled from his teaching job at Oxford. Friends alerted him that the government was coming to arrest him so he fled to Europe, never to return to England.
- 22.** Wait...Europe? Wasn't that out of the frying pan into the fire? Not exactly; he went to Switzerland, a nation that has always guarded its independence. Safe in its mountains, Erasmus published a Greek New Testament that had the Latin text side by side with the ancient text. He included notes, pointing out the errors in the Vulgate and the false doctrines that sprang from those errors. That was the beginning of the end of the Vulgate. He bravely said "I utterly dissent from those who are unwilling that the sacred Scriptures should be read by the unlearned, translated into their own...language. I wish that even the weakest woman should read the Gospels, should read the Epistles of St. Paul. I long that the husbandman should sing some portion of them to himself as he follows the plough."
- 23.** Side note here: A Roman Catholic Cardinal, Ximenes, of Toledo, Spain also published a complete Bible that had both testaments in Greek, a Hebrew version of the Old Testament, and a Latin translation of the Old Testament. For some reason, it went nowhere.

24. English authorities banned Erasmus' book and Erasmus was not the kind of man who would fight to get his book read and known. He just wasn't a salesman or a man of action. That would require another man come along...and he did.